

SHATTERED STAR



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You," was all he said, stomping toward me with bloody hands.

The wererats had seized me before I even knew what had happened. One to either side, they dragged me from the foul-smelling straw that had broken my fall. My left hand and wrist throbbed painfully where I had landed on my hand, having extended my arms in a foolish attempt to arrest my descent. Fortunately, the trapdoor was only some ten feet above the moldering straw pile. Whoever had set the trap obviously wanted those who fell into it alive and in good condition.

Looking into the Gundsric's wild eyes, I had to wonder how long that would last.

He lumbered over to me, the heavy pewter flask he wore around his neck swaying like a pendulum, his hunchback giving him a strangely lopsided appearance. The basement was lit by a few sputtering candles, but even in such low light I could see nearly the entirety of the room with uncommon clarity, no doubt the continued effects of the gleam in my system. Beyond the small alcove into which I had fallen—which could be locked up like a prison cell with the closing of a barred gate at one

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end—the basement was long and rectangular, its dirty plaster walls flaking away in patches to reveal ill-fitting stone blocks. The scribbles of gleam addicts filled every section of plaster that had not yet crumbled to the ground, stretching from floor to ceiling like a detailed map of an insane mind.

But it was the bodies that were the core of the place—dozens of men and women, nearly all of them human, stacked in piles or lying in the few cots scattered around the room. The thick smell of blood and rot in the air seemed only magnified by the underlying mustiness of the basement, and I choked back the rising bile in my throat. The dingy cots gave the impression of long use, like those in the common room of some cheap flophouse. But there were far more bodies than beds, and many of the oldest corpses were stacked against the wall opposite the alcove, heaped up like swollen sandbags bracing a levee.

I screamed then, shouting for Shess or Mordimor or some other deliverance. The rats to either side of me hauled me farther into that gallery of death, and I could see that there were more hunched shape-shifters in the basement all around me.

Riding on instinct, not caring at all about the futility of my struggle, I drove my heel into the bare foot of the one on my right, then tried to pull him off balance. He staggered, but his center of balance was lower than mine, and his tail kept him from tipping. Snarling, he slammed a blow into my stomach, and I dropped to my knees. He clamped a hand over my throat and jerked my head close, chattered threats or promises in my ear. His garbage-foul breath washed over me, and I retched.

The rat to my left was running his paws over my body, taking his time. Upon finding the long knife under my jacket, he snatched the weapon from its sheath and threw it into the corner. There was another such blade in my boot that he didn't find, and I hoped I'd have a chance to use it.

Gundsric loomed over me, a misshapen, palpable malignance. He smiled, teeth filmed with fresh blood, his beardless face wrinkling up like crumpled paper.

"I don't remember making an appointment with you today, elf." His laughter bubbled thickly up from blood-filled lungs. The harsh chemical reek he exuded was almost a welcome respite from the sickly sweet stench of decay that filled my nostrils.

I didn't reply, doubting the claw-tipped hand around my neck would allow any speech.

"Check upstairs," Gundsric barked. "This spy has friends." Dark shapes in the corner moved out of my line of sight, and I heard the faint sounds of feet scraping up stairs.

It was then, while trying to follow the movement of the second group of wererats, that I noticed the final detail about the corpses that lined the basement.

They were gleamers, of course—that much was obvious from the markings on the wall. But these bodies told a further tale. Shess hadn't seemed to know how or why gleam users disappeared eventually, but they always turned up dead, if they turned up at all. Dead and blind. And here they were: each face devoid of eyes, the sockets yawning a deeper black in the dark.

"Go with them, my sweet." Gundsric's murmur had taken on an oddly affectionate tone. "See all."

I turned back to him, wondering whom he was speaking to, only to find him shrugging as if in a seizure. Beneath his clothing, his malformed shoulder twitched and jerked, the hunch shuddering as if it had a life of its own.

And it did. Emerging from beneath his jerkin was a lopsided mass of flesh like a lesion, a cancerous growth made animate. It chirped once through a pore-like orifice, unfurled membranous wings the color of burned skin, and took flight after the departing wererats. Riding above a sudden heaving nausea, my thoughts tracked back to the persistently circling bat I had seen the night before, the one that had hunted the skies as the wererats arrived at the Clippers' hideout.

Gundsric chuckled. "So, you've seen dear Carchima around, perhaps? He gave a most specific report about you. Though neither of us has yet deduced who it is you work for."

I started to speak, gurgling out a response as the wererat tightened his grip on my throat. Gundsric stepped forward and backhanded me across the face.

"One or the other of them," he growled. "I don't care! Cromarcky would be most likely, yes? Croat and his boys would have a better use for the likes of you. Right now the both of them are at a stalemate, pacing around outside my home like gulls waiting for the tide to bring in the trash. After tonight it won't matter. I'll tread on their charred corpses and watch this whole damn town burn."

The hand that had slapped me came back around to cup my chin. "And it's because of you," he crooned. "I had been complacent. Me, complacent! But you made me step things up, made me round up as many of these *insects*"—he waved a bloody hand in the direction of a pile of corpses—"as I could get hold of last night. Made me come out here and do it myself, take the rest of them all in one go."

Gundsric scooped a gnarled hand into the sealskin bag he wore at his side and produced a palmful of glistening eyeballs, each glowing with its own light.

"No one upstairs, not even that vicious little badger of hers," hissed a voice I faintly recognized. I tore my eyes away from Gundsric's palm, his handful of luminous orbs like bloody organic pearls. Carchima fluttered clumsily back to Gundsric's shoulder and landed with a wet smack. The wererats had returned from their exploration, and

in their lead was the scarred, black-furred female I had fought at the Clippers' wharfside hideout. She fixed beady eyes upon me and licked her lips. "I'll take that elf's eyes now."

"No," Gundsric said flatly. Carchima squirmed its way back under his clothing with nauseating intimacy. "I can better use her, I think. She wasn't given that street garbage, she's as pure as I am. And... she showed me the way." He leaned in close to me, and it was then that I noticed for the first time that his own black eyes shone as intensely as Idrek's had. Gundsric nodded at the recognition, and I wondered if my own eyes were filled with such light.

"Is the fire behind your eyes, elf?" Gundsric was nearly whispering now. The stink of sulfur and dizzying reek of carbauxine poured out of him as if he were some poisonous fissure in the earth. "Do you hear the radiant choir, as I first did all those years ago? The others said I was mad, wanted no part of my search, but I kept digging. Digging toward the voice—the burning voice like a pyre for all the world!" He smiled his bloody smile at me, his eyes luminous and searching.

"Ziphras didn't send us out to be dog-slaves to a mad dwarf," the female wererat interrupted. She spat on a corpse, and hissed something at the wererats to either side of her. There were half a dozen of them in the basement, all wearing their in-between forms, standing on their hind legs as hideous, man-sized rats. "I owe this elf a debt of blood. Her gang killed my kin, ruined our trade. Ziphras will mark me for this failure." The livid scar beneath her eye twitched. "You owe me her life, blood-debt to be paid."

Gundsric only growled, then began to cough. The other rats in the basement chattered among themselves, and I could sense the anxiety of the two that flanked me, their uncertainty as to which way this challenge to Gundsric would go. It seemed all was not well in the dwarf's employ.

The black-furred female was padding closer to Gundsric's back, and I saw the glint of a hooked blade in her hand. "No trade now, and no Clippers. No more buyers—all dead or fled. I wonder... how much longer will Ziphras make deals with you for a drug he can't sell?"

The alchemist's coughing had subsided to a rhythmic hitch, like a second heartbeat. Gundsric didn't speak, didn't turn, but I saw his hand stray to the belt he wore beneath his stained and scarred leather apron.

"Take your hand off the potion, dwarf," the wererat hissed, creeping yet closer to the alchemist's back.

Gundsric spat a gob of black mucous onto the floor. Keeping his eyes on me, he pulled his hand away in a flash, withdrawing a coin pouch from beneath his apron. The nervous rats next to me tensed as if an electric jolt

had pulsed through them, then relaxed just as quickly when they saw what the dwarf had been reaching for.

Gundsric raised the coin pouch high, tipped it, and spilled out a small fortune in gold sails that rang upon the stones of the floor. Every rat in the room watched them fall, the gold reflected in their beady eyes.

Then he spun and threw something with his other hand, straight at the black-furred wererat. With uncanny accuracy it struck her face, exploding in a blast of white and blue fire.

I flinched, feeling the blast even from half a room away. The wererat shrieked as alchemical flame engulfed first her face, then the entirety of her body. Rats darted away from her, a few suffering minor burns themselves. But the female blazed like a torch, stumbling blind before toppling over one of the corpse-filled cots and crashing to the ground. The other rats stood stunned for a moment as the female writhed on the ground, her body roiling in sulfurous white flame that clung to her like tar.

Gundsric raved then, shouting threats at the rats, telling them their choice was between the gold on the floor and the burning body on the ground. The stink of scorched fur and flesh filled the room, and smoke stung my eyes and brought tears. But even through my blurred vision I noticed the silent figure that had just entered the room from the far corner, where I knew the stairs to be.

It was Gyrd, but not as I had ever before seen him. His mail glistened silver, polished and well maintained in contrast to the dirty and rent hauberk the fighter routinely slept in. He stood taller, straighter, like a noble warrior out of some Ulfen saga. His beard was trimmed close and clean, and his long hair was gathered neatly into thick plaits. There was no gray in the fiery red mane, no flush of drunkenness on his fair skin, and no shadows under the clear, proud eyes.

He drew a mirror-bright sword and opened his mouth in a silent roar.

The wererats saw him. They crashed around the room in surprise, some heading for the shadows, one even managing to fall over the smoldering form of the dead female on the floor. Some let fly a few knives and darts, which sliced through the dark with no effect. Gyrd advanced, rolling his wrist so that his blade danced deadly circles in the air.

I could hear Gundsric's shouts over the din and squeal of the panicking rats. He had noticed the same thing I had: That this bright image of Gyrd, standing tall like a hero of legend, wasn't real. It was an illusion.

But the blade that ripped through the wererat next to me was real enough.

The image of Gyrd vanished. The rat let out a piercing wail and crumpled to the floor, limbs twitching in his

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death throes, and then Shess was next to me, sword in hand.

I spared no time marveling at the gnome's skill in sneaking undetected into and around a basement full of wererats. Whipping my newly freed right arm around in an arc, I drove my palm into the face of my remaining captor, smashing the soft nose at the end his snout. He chattered in anger, jerking me forward and raking his claws against my shoulder and chest. Warm blood flowed from the stinging wound.

Ignore it, Taldara. Push it aside. My father's words rang in my mind. *Everything is won or lost in the head, not the body. Without focus, you're no better than your human blood.* I had always challenged him when he said such things about humanity, but he would laugh and make a joke of it, claiming he only said them to rile me, to challenge and push me. He was right about focus, though, and a great deal more, even when he was so infuriatingly wrong. I sometimes suspect my rebellion against him was his object all along—my final graduation from his academy of life.

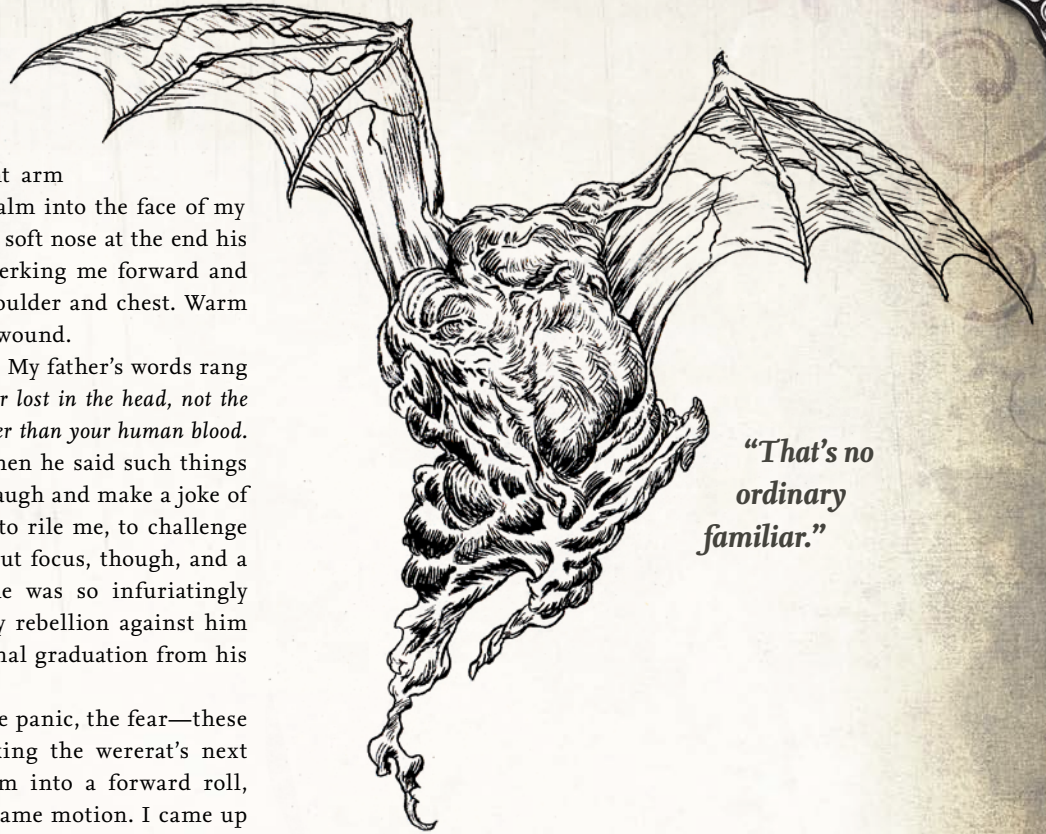
I kept my focus. The pain, the panic, the fear—these were like old memories. Ducking the wererat's next strike, I turned my momentum into a forward roll, drawing my boot knife in the same motion. I came up in a crouch next to my attacker, well inside his guard, and drove my blade into his guts. Black blood spurted from the wound as he flailed at me, and I struck again. He jerked back, collapsing in a twitching heap, his rat-screams mingling with the chaotic din of the basement.

I sprang to my feet in time to see Gundsric raise the pewter flask he wore around his neck to his lips.

More rats converged on Shess and me, blocking my view of the alchemist. The gnome spun and darted among them, a maddeningly nimble and unpredictable opponent. I fought defensively, with knife and fist, my back to the wall. The rats were enraged now and, in their half-human forms, they seemed disinclined to draw their weapons, fighting instead with claws and teeth.

"Keep them off me!" Shess yelled. I turned my head in time to see her repel her attacker with a quick chop to the thigh. In almost the same movement she tossed her sword to me. I barely caught it in my off-hand, then threw my own dagger over her head, at the wererat nearest her. Taking her short sword in my newly freed right hand, I stepped forward to cover the gnome.

Shess's sword was as light as my boot knife, and keen as a razor. I slashed, backing the rats off, ignoring a glancing blow to my arm. There were three wererats left, though the one Shess had wounded was keeping his distance, hobbling along the edge of the combat and looking for an



"That's no ordinary familiar."

opening to throw a knife. I kept slashing, more to create space around us than to do damage. And in that moment, I noticed the change that had come over Gundsric.

He was broader and taller, the muscles bulging beneath his dirty clothes like those of some Shoanti barbarian fresh down from the Storval Plateau. The remnants of a potion stained his lips, mingling with the bloody sputum of his black lung that ran down his chin. The insane light of his eyes was as bright as a lamp now. As bright as a bonfire. As bright as—

The basement exploded in multicolored light, a rainbow of blinding force. I had been ready for it, but even still I found myself temporarily blind. Shess's child hand closed over my wrist and dragged me to the right, while the snarls and shouts of our enemies reverberated in our ears.

"Come on!" Shess shouted as I tripped over the first of the stairs. "Straight up this way."

I ran blindly up the stairs, the world black as night after the blast of blinding color from Shess's spell. We came to a landing, and then a small room whose walls I could see as faint blotches of gray in the dark. Shess guided me to the door, taking her sword out of my hand as she did so, and I squinted to bring the world back into focus.

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The afterimage of the spell was wearing off quickly, but even still it was as if I had been staring at the sun before plunging into a dark cave.

There was light in the short hall we entered, and I realized it was from the lantern in the common room of the Forty Fathoms. We darted down the hall quickly, arriving in the alehouse's dusty front room, and I vaguely recognized the furnishings through my blurred vision. Behind us someone was clambering up the stair.

"Stick to the left wall," Shess told me.

We were almost at the door when it burst open, slamming against the wall and rattling the thick glass in the alehouse windows.

"Hrushgak!" Shess said cheerily. "And I see you brought Idrek."

The half-orc wasn't the first thing I would have wanted to see with my restored vision. Almost as big as Gyrd, he was leaner, sharper-featured, but no less muscled than the Ulfen warrior. He wore a scarred black leather vest with rings sown on to it, but his thick arms were bare save for vambraces of silver-chased steel and pale scars like worms tracking over his greenish skin. Protruding from his piggish face was an asymmetric jumble of dirty fangs.

He clutched a dripping axe in his right hand. In his left, held up by his black hair, was the head of the gleam addict Idrek.

"He said you would be here, little thief." Hrushgak flung Idrek's head contemptuously into the room, where it struck the floorboards with a sound like dropped sack of meal. More thugs were pushing into the room behind him, all tough-looking half-orcs—Boss Croat's drug-trade enforcers. "I never liked you, gnome."

Shess began to protest, her feelings clearly—and strangely—hurt. And then Gundsric stomped into the room behind us.

He looked more a monster than a dwarf. Grotesquely muscled, his body now sprouted mottled thorns like the spikes of some shelled sea creature. At his shoulder Carchima spread his wings of skin and shrieked. The alchemist's eyes burned like Riddleport's beacon tower.

"I will kill every one of you," Gundsric said, his voice flat and emotionless.

Hrushgak smiled, baring his jumble of wicked yellow teeth. "I was just about to say the same thing."

Both sides moved at once, with Shess and me caught in the middle. Hrushgak feigned a strike at me and I leapt back as he barreled past, intent on Gundsric. One of the half-orcs went after Shess with a spiked club, but she deftly maneuvered him over to the trapdoor. He dropped through with a yelp, smacking his head on the lip of the floor as he did so.

An explosion tore through the room, knocking me forward in a wave of heat and force. Another alchemical bomb. I caught myself on the wall, one of Hrushgak's thugs inches away. He thrust a knife at me and I slipped to the side, but he caught me across the forearm with a wild backswing.

I was unarmed now, and the knife-wielding half-orc probably weighed twice what I did. Shess had her own



"Gundsric's potions don't make him any prettier."

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problems in the shape of a nearly naked maniac with a short-hafted axe in each hand.

I kept my arms out, hoping to catch my attacker's wrist or else turn aside his thrust. I was close to the door—a well-timed roll could take me past him and out into the street.

The half-orc chuckled, noting the direction of my gaze. Weaving the serrated blade in an intricate pattern between us, he licked his lips. "Ain't no one gonna save you now, sweet meat."

A streak of black and white burst through the open door and proved him wrong. Mordimor, snarling and yipping, launched himself at the half-orc's legs. Blood flew and the half-orc screamed and staggered. I lunged forward, catching his knife hand in both of mine, and drove the weapon through his eye. He collapsed heavily to the floor, the bone-handled weapon lodged in his face to the hilt.

"I was worried about you, Mord," I said. Mordimor looked at me in the way he does, adorable despite the bloody froth that ringed his muzzle.

Shess had finished with her own attacker and the way was clear, the rest of the thugs having converged on Gundsric and one of his remaining henchrats. We darted out of there—Shess handing me one of the axes she had taken from the berserker—just as another explosion shook the place. The windows of the Forty Fathoms blew out into the street.

"Let me go in first next time, Tal," Shess said breathlessly next to me as we turned back to watch the alehouse from the cover of a nearby alleyway. The muddy street was littered with glass, glistening in the afternoon light like ice. Inside the Forty Fathoms, flames blossomed.

Mordimor looked up from his cleaning and chuffed agreement, wiping his bloody face with a moistened paw.

"I'll insist on it, Shess. In fact, I think you'll get the chance within the hour." She looked at me in surprise, one green eyebrow quirked upward.

Was I really thinking about doing this? With Gundsric busy fighting Croat's thugs—or, even better, dead at their hands—now seemed like the opportunity I had been waiting for. I was exhausted, wounded, frayed to my last nerve. All this sneaking and fighting, the gangs and their squabbles, Gundsric's own hideous plot in supplying drugs to the city for whatever strange destructive revenge this would grant him—it was all secondary to my purpose. To the story as it had to be told. I could almost see Master Shaine shaking his head; in amusement or disappointment, who could say?

"We're going to break into that crazy dwarf's house and finish this for good." It felt good to say it—more, it felt *right* somehow. Shess added her own enthusiastic

agreement. We spent some time tending our wounds, my own minor healing magic knitting the slash on my shoulder closed and hopefully rendering it free of the bad humors associated with wererats. I told Shess of my real purpose in finding employment with Gundsric, finally telling her the whole truth. She relished every detail, excited not only at the prospect of stealing treasure, but at rediscovering the lost adventures of a famous Pathfinder.

Gundsric's house was close, only a few squalid blocks from the tavern, but Shess and I made the journey with deliberate caution, wary of encountering another group of half-orcs, or surviving Clippers, or Desna knows what else. We made a brief detour when Shess spied an odd jobs man pushing his tool cart through the street. For a ridiculous sum I bought a length of rope from him, frayed and tarred, and Shess picked up a few stout nails she said would help her climb. With a wink he unrolled a square of oilcloth to expose a worn set of thieves' picks, but Shess declined. Clearly the man catered to all sorts of clientele.

Part of our caution was also due to Gundsric's ravings about his home being surrounded by the forces of Croat and Cromarcky. I didn't want to be seen approaching by any suspicious guards. How Shess and I would manage to get around a patrol and somehow climb to a third floor window—a window that was hopefully still unlocked—was something I was not prepared to worry about just yet. If the last few days had taught me anything, it was to take things one step at a time.

The place was indeed surrounded, and more thoroughly than I had imagined. Black-clad half-orcs with an array of brutal weapons shared the space around the heavy stone walls of the house with Cromarcky's uniformed gendarmes. Together they shouted off bystanders and smacked around the occasional too-curious passerby. They glared uneasily at one another, hands always upon their weapons. Their truce was an uneasy one, and no doubt whoever was to eventually win the right to Gundsric's home would be something decided at the highest levels. So until the bosses made their decision, the guards would continue to pace belligerently back and forth outside, spoiling for a fight. Shess was already proposing we distract them before climbing up—either with an illusion, or a fire, or a barrage of fish. Her suggestions grew steadily more absurd, but I wasn't paying attention. Instead, I stared in disbelief at the figure moving easily among the guards. I could only shake my head, not even daring to guess what his presence meant.

Kostin Dalackz strutted and joked with gendarmes and half-orcs alike, a ready smile on his face and the scepter bundled in an old cloak at his side.